

Statements made by artists must always be considered with scepticism, especially with the passing of time. One does not find in these the 'true meaning' of an artist's work. Oftentimes an artist's remarks are deliberately devised to conceal the truth, acting instead to perpetuate misunderstanding around one's practice. Artist statements need to be decoded, because they inevitably relate to a carefully constructed camouflage of sorts, at once staged and genuine, calculated and unplanned but always performed. Fitri Graham was not so interested in this kind of construction herself. Perhaps her failure to cultivate a public personality was instrumental to the unpopularity of her work. Though to settle on this simplistic understanding would signal a failure to appreciate the uphill task that a female painter of abstract forms faced working in Sydney in 1949. The truth of this cannot be downplayed.

It is it hard to dwell on the lifelong frustrations of a friend. Fitri was crushed in the weeks following the opening of *Melancholia*. I observed her quick closing, her swift withdrawal from painting. Ida Lawrence has asked me to write about the show from the perspective of one of Fitri's inner circle. Within the context of a new presentation, I can only hope to provide some sort of parity to the underwhelming popular reception of her work. As a painter myself I would like to add weight to her work's critical reception too. Of course, statements from those close to artists must also be taken with a grain of salt. These too are often the means by which histories are re-written and personal agendas privileged. With this in mind, accounts from those close to an artist do reveal something of their attitude towards life and towards their art. I hope very much that this is one of those.

We have always been too quick to criticise the things that artists make. Critique often comes from a fixed perception of practice that positions a work as finished, a frozen testament to the inner workings, positions, convictions and even personal preferences of an artist. Fitri's practice itself was an open work. One would speak today of a 'work in progress' to describe an ongoing method of enquiry rather than the pre-meditated, steady concentration of effort to produce single, finished works which stand by themselves in isolation. I would often go to visit Fitri in her studio at the back room of her house in Mosman. Here, to see a pile of unfinished canvases stacked in the corner was a familiar sight. Unquestionably, these would be worked on again in time, only to be placed back down in the corner, from where they would return again at a later date. She had difficulty finishing works, returning to a single subject each time under different effects.

The paintings in *Melancholia* formed a constellation, the numerous points of which spiralled outwards from a nodal area of central concern. This concern pertained to the de-materialisation of body. Through her paintings, Fitri wanted to engender a totalising landscape suitable for introspection, a vacuum for the eyes and a backdrop against which the mind could leave the body. The installation of these paintings provided not a chronology but a map, evidencing an extended consideration of the effects of harmonious negative and positive spacing on the eyes. Rather than searching for things like stylistic progress, evolution of line and form, I took pleasure in noticing the similarities, the differences and the serendipitous moments that emerged between works. In this way one painting was present in the next. The individual piece was encompassed in the body of work and the body of work's lineage recognisable in a single canvas.

Any corporeal response to the installation was substituted in favour of visual play. This negation of bodily rhythm within her work situates Fitri at odds with the gestural styles of American contemporaries like Pollock, Kline and De Kooning, who's sweeping lines record the movements of the painter across the canvas. Fitri's floating images encouraged an obliteration of the body altogether, reducing the viewer to a single pair of eyes.

It is bitterly ironic then, that after their swift dismissal by the Sydney art world, these images would reappear as backdrops against which the body took centre stage, in photographs. There is not much more to say about this cursed turn of events than that it was hideously unfair, and that it struck a monstrously crushing blow to Fitri's heart.

**Sebastian Henry-Jones, friend of Fitri Graham
Belrose Country Club Retirement Village, Sydney, Australia
October 2016**